



Sermon, February 16

Luke 7:18-35

There is a trend on social media that resulted in a spin off to a reality baking competition, called “Is It Cake?”. I have to tell you, this game has very quickly become one of my guilty pleasures because it is incredibly simple: you are shown a picture of an object and need to determine if the object is real, or if it is actually cake made to *look* like the object. This sounds very obvious—you might think to yourself, “Vicar Jesse, of course I know the difference between a banana and a piece of cake that looks like a banana” but in actuality, it is much harder than it looks.

Challenges with knowing what is real and what isn’t are not confined to baked goods either. As generative artificial intelligence continues to develop, it has become even better at creating fake images and videos that are incredibly realistic. Our technology’s ability to replicate reality, however, in many instances is surpassing our human ability to recognize when things are real or not.

So, with all of this in mind, I would encourage us to extend a little empathy to poor John the Baptist who dares to ask Jesus a question that I’m sure was on a lot of people’s minds— “Are you *really* the one who is to come? Are you *really* the Messiah, our Savior?” Because sometimes, even when something is staring us straight in the face, it is really hard to figure out what is true.

John has known Jesus his whole life—the Bible says he “leapt in the womb” when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit his mother, Elizabeth. Jesus is familiar to him; Jesus is someone he has known for a long time. And like John, I think sometimes we have trouble recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst because it is so often disguised as something ordinary. We hear stories of miraculous healings and Jesus bringing back people from the dead, like the ones from our Gospel reading last Sunday, and so that’s what we look for. And while it is great to be on the lookout for these miracles of healing, or moments when the Holy Spirit overwhelms us with her presence, I don’t want us to become distracted from the nudges we might deem more ordinary— the ones we sometimes miss. Too often I think we get caught up in the chaos of our world and our lives that we can’t see what’s right in front of us or we don’t allow ourselves to imagine the unexpected or surprising things God is doing in our lives.

Likewise, I think sometimes overwhelming suffering in the world and in our communities, what feels like the ever-growing list of things that are going wrong, acts as further distraction from the ways God is still at work. This is certainly the case when we look further at John the Baptist’s situation. You see, John isn’t asking this of Jesus for no reason—and there is a reason why John doesn’t ask Jesus himself. For speaking out against the violence of the ruling empire, John has been placed in prison. So, when John asks Jesus if he is *really* the one they have been expecting, I think it also comes from a place of John looking around and wondering if this is really part of the plan. How can the Messiah have come if the empire still looms large? How is God here to save God’s people if God’s people are still being taken captive?

I understand why John the Baptist is confused because I too, like John the Baptist, often hope that God will show up in the world in a very specific way. I expect justice now, and I expect justice to look exactly the way I want it to. I expect to see liberation, inclusion, acceptance, and for my will to be God’s will instead of the other way around. I find myself like John the Baptist, ignoring all the things God is actually doing, the ways the Holy Spirit is already at work. The weight of human suffering in the world feels impossible to bear.

Jesus responds to John’s questions with an answer that reminds us that God’s power is unlike anything we anticipate. God did not come to earth as a king, God did not come with weapons, God did not come to graft power from the rich and socially important. God came to mix up the whole system—to be with the lowly and the marginalized. Jesus comes in unexpected ways and asks us to bear witness to the unexpected among us.

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